

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

24 The Social History and Organization

Child-

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Children are expected from Sea Island marriages, whether they are the couple's own or just living with them. Children are highly prized regardless of the financial condition of the parents, and abortion is rare and generally viewed as an abomination against God and nature. If a young couple joins a parent's household, rather than establishing a new one, the elder members of the family usually take responsibility for the care and discipline of the children. Many elderly residents, the guardians of several generations of children, attribute their longevity and good health to the belief that they *cannot* die until all the children for whom they are responsible are grown and able to care for themselves, or until their responsibilities are delegated to someone else. Some children are reared by sisters, aunts, uncles, or even distant cousins. It is not unusual for a child to reach adulthood living not more than a block from the natural parent but residing with another relative, who is perhaps childless or more financially secure. Even children born out of wedlock generally know who their fathers and grandparents are. These children are given the same respect in the community as legitimate children and are as likely to be reared by the paternal side of the family as by the maternal side.⁴⁵

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The church is probably the most important social organization in the Sea Island communities. Outwardly, the Sunday services follow the patterns prescribed for Baptist and Methodist churches and are thus based on Christian doctrine. Some of the beliefs of black Christians in the Sea Islands are quite distinctive. For example, I have heard many elderly residents speak of a tripartite division of the human being into body, soul, and spirit, whereas Christian doctrine teaches that a person has only a body and a soul which is synonymous with the spirit. According to many elderly island residents, when one dies, only the soul returns to the kingdom of God. The body and spirit remain on earth. And although the soul of the dead person cannot harm the living, the spirit can, at will, cause another to harm him- or herself.⁴⁶

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This concept of a tripartite body, soul, and spirit, with the body and spirit remaining on earth after death and able to influence the living, is widespread in West Africa today. Many African peoples do not conceive of any geographical separation between the real world and the spirit world; as soon as the body dies physically, they believe the person arrives in the spirit world.⁴⁷ To these physical and spiritual entities, some societies add a belief in a "shadow" entity.⁴⁸ The Sea

159 She is fifty or
more years of age, gets around well, is the oldest member of her
household, and is primarily responsible for the total care of more than
• (185) ten children, ranging in ages from two to sixteen years of age. Some of
them are her own children; others are her grandchildren and great-
grandchildren. Six of them live with her, and four are left in her care
(123) during the day while their parents are away working. I had the pleasure
of spending more than two weeks residing with Miss Deeley and her
large family. I shared a large room with three of the girls and came to
(151) appreciate the effort that went into keeping that room clean and orderly
at all times. No one was allowed to retire for the evening without a
bath regardless of circumstances. Most of the time, a fire was built
around a large black pot in the early evening to heat the water for baths
before supper was served. All the children were lined up and given
baths in a number-three washtub, given their nightclothes, and served
supper around a large handmade wooden table. Miss Deeley had not
(354) accepted electricity for her home, so a kerosene lamp was the primary
source of light after nightfall. Mealtime was always a pleasure at this
(264) home. The last meal of the day often consisted of cowpeas and rice
(262) cooked and seasoned with "bone," or rice served with shrimp and
other fish caught by the children during the day. There was always hot
corn bread and molasses and a bucket of iced tea.

159 After meals were served, the children gathered around the open
539 fireplace, and Miss Deeley entertained all of us for hours until the fire
died down and the sleeping children had to be carried to their beds.
This woman was an avid storyteller. Her general procedure was first to
get everyone settled. Then she herself could get comfortable in the
place always reserved for her by the window. After poking around in
the fire until she was satisfied that it was burning well, she would lean
back in her chair, take a couple of good bites of tobacco, kept in her
apron pocket, and then lift up the youngest child into her lap and begin
to reminisce about happenings during the day. She had the ability to
tell a range of stories, but she seemed particularly adept at hag, ghost,
or other psychological thrillers. She traveled around much in her day as
a migrant worker in Arizona and Colorado; she said she heard some of
her stories around the campfires there. Others she had learned from her
parents and grandparents, and still others she said she had just made up
to keep the children entertained.

538 Miss Deeley was fairly strict with the children. Once she permitted
115 two of the oldest to go to the island store for some "sweet"; she spat

4: Caravan & Carawan B,2-5 (1959-1988) 1989
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South Carolina
Johns Island

Mr. Esau Jenkins

SOMETIMES WE UNDERESTIMATE THESE PEOPLE

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The people on Johns Island, those that are not working in the city or as domestics, most of them make their living off truck farms on the island. Especially the women. They work on the farms of plantation owners. They pick snap beans, they dig white potatoes, they pick tomatoes, peck cabbages, spinach and whatnot. Those are the things that they depend on for a living.

During the winter months they go into a hardship because most of the farms don't have anything to do. That's the hardest time that they have to face.

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Sometimes we underestimate these people and forget they have something we really need. These are people who haven't gotten a college education, or even a high school education. But anyone able to raise twelve children—and raise 'em healthy too—must know something good. They were smart enough to plant and to raise the kind of thing the children need. They raised their own hogs, they raised their cows, they had the milk with vitamin D what they need.

Some of these older people thought very deeply. Mother-wit and faith in God helped them to do a lot, and some achieved more than some of the young people who have been able to go to college.

159 was there. I didn't have no partner to pick up potato with, so he say, "Come
 584 on; I'll be your partner." So we was partner for the day, picking up potato
 until over with. And when I get 'round about fifteen, sixteen years old, he
 come to my house and ask my mother can he keep my company. My mother
 ask me, will I accept it. First I say I don't know. So he come back and come
 back. And finally he wrote my mother a letter. Mother call me, she ask me,
 will I accept Arthur Lee company. So I say yes.

Those years keeping company I doesn't go out with no fellas, but I does
 see other boys, talk to them, go out to a party my brother be along. But I
 never love but one, and that's the one I get married to.

159 Now I'm twenty-five. I have five children. I work from seven in the
 401 morning 'til five-thirty in the evening—five days a week doing kitchen work.
 I mind five children, and when I get home I got to take care of five of my
 own.

My husband leave home 'bout six in the morning for he to wait on the
 road for a ride to go to work. He don't have he own transportation. He works
 out on contractor job, 'round about four years now.

(465) It's tough to raise five children—sure is. My husband make 'round
 thirty, sometime forty dollars a week. And if it rain he don't bring in that
 because he don't work. I get paid for holiday when I'm off, but my husband
 don't get paid. He just have to wait it out. My mother used to take care of
 • (855) the children that aren't in school before the house burn down, but now I
 don't have anyone to take care of them. I have to stay off from work and
 start all over housewife again.

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Mr. William Saunders

GOING TO NEW YORK IS AN ADVANTAGE
AND A DISADVANTAGE

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Most people think about their kids. It's so hard raising kids in New York. And it's so easy for kids to go bad there. So most of the kids are left here with the grandparents while the parents are in New York working, and when they get a certain age they think about it. And they rebel. They find something bad to do. They try to get back somehow at their parents.

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Most of the people that go away from here leave their kids. If the wife and the husband are going to be working, they have nobody to care for the kids, so they leave them home. And the grandparents have gotten to a certain age, they raised their kids, and they're so much more lenient on their grandkids than they were on their own kids. So this is one of the real big problems, I think. The kids suffer.

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I was born in New York. I was one of these babies that was shipped here—not even somebody bringing me, they used to put tags on you and just put you on the train and say where you're supposed to get off at. I was raised by my grandparents and actually when a grandparent raise a kid, there are two generations between, and there's so much less understanding there. Things that the parents would probably understand, the grandparents cannot understand. And this was my problem.

This is something that is still going on, and I think it's gonna be going on and on. And this is one of the things that the Negroes have really been suffering from—this grandparents raising the children and the children not getting actually what they need. I believe if a kid really wants something, like he wants music lessons or he wants to study farming, or anything, if they say that they want to do it, I think that somebody should be there to help them with it. So even if they fail, they can't say, "I didn't have the opportunity." I think he should have the right to try, and if he fails, he can't blame nobody but himself because he just couldn't make it.

But like me now, I can sit back and blame my grandparents and my parents for not being successful. I don't know, I just feel to me that I could have been somebody. And I got somebody to blame for not being somebody.

Kids here need an opportunity.

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Going to New York is a disadvantage and an advantage. To live I think it's a disadvantage. Some things are lacking here, but the children have home. So we don't have everything that we want for them. But they have their home, so all they need is to get along like everybody else—daily living.

873 For three generations a few young women on the island have attended college. At the time of the field work for the present study, at least four young women were attending colleges within and outside of the state. No young men were [874] orientated toward college, although one had attended technical school. Reasons for this sex difference will be discussed in the final chapter on social factors related to linguistic change.

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505 The rhythm of daily life on the island centers around the morning and evening boat trips to and from it. Before seven in the morning the noisy school boat has taken the first load of youngsters to meet the school bus at the mainland landing. Numerous small boats take workers to their cars at the landing or to meet rides on the highway some four miles further. During the day, the only men usually on the island [732] are two who are blind and one or two who may be temporarily [734] sick. Several older women remain, some of whom care for [855] very young children entrusted to their care. Occasionally a younger woman with several pre-school children remains daily to care for them, but most women have mainland jobs. By

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505 four o'clock the last boatload of children has returned from mainland schools, and older boys prepare to meet returning parents in the family boats. By dark, most of the people have returned to their island homes and will spend the remainder of the evening on the island, except for special [574] occasions. Occasionally trips will be made to visit a sick

6: Smith

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178 elements of their cultural heritage? On a broader level,
Africanisms have been clearly cited in the music and
dancing patterns of mainland Blacks. Likewise the gospel
music of the Sea Islands is viewed as highly permeated with
African cultural entities. In the same vein, the African
features of Sea Island religious beliefs and ceremonies are
well established. The African features in the dancing pat-
terns of Sea Islanders has been noted also.

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855 The survival of African Cultural traits in the family
structuring and in the child rearing habits and beliefs of
Sea Islanders has not been carefully researched. Data of
this sort is disjointed, and comes primarily as an indirect
contribution of the numerous collection of Sea Island folk-
lores. This literature does note some child rearing fea-
tures which are common to Sea Islanders and to Blacks else-
where in the Western Hemisphere who are of West African
heritage. The following are examples of these commonly
held beliefs:

(1845)
(1789)
(1789)
(1751)
(1754) A child born with a face caul is able to see
supernatural forces and is able to see visions
of ancestors.

Charms, necklaces, bracelets have the power
to protect against supernatural affliction and
to ward off disease.

The hair and nails of people can be used in
"conja" to bring harm. Consequently the
parent warns the child not to have strangers
comb hair or to cut nails. Parent may also
instruct child to destroy residue hair and
nails.

6: Smith

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Babies are passed over the coffin of ancestors during burial rites.

Children born feet first are gifted and able to manipulate binding constraints.

Children may be named according to season of birth, birth order, and of birth date.¹⁸

In a more recent research effort Kiser suggests that grandparents assume a major responsibility in the Sea Island family.¹⁹ This investigation suggests that the role of grandparents was primarily due to: (a) the migration of younger parents to urban cities while leaving behind offsprings to the care and rearing traditions of grandparents, (b) the seasonal employment patterns whereby the parent temporarily leaves the Island in search of jobs on the mainland.

Undoubtedly these factors do act as antecedents, however, the extent to which this behavior is affected by cultural tradition has not been entertained. Hence it is uncertain whether the status accorded elder Sea Islanders and their family roles are primarily related to environmental factors or more so to the survival of West African cultural elements. There is reason to suggest that the functioning of elders in the Sea Island family and

¹⁸ Herakovits and F. S. Dahomey, Life in the Haitian Valley (2 vols.; New York: 1937-1938).

¹⁹ Vernon Kiser, Sea Island to Urban Centers (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932).

6: Smith

I,Y-5

(no date) 1989

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121 particularly of the status accorded are reflective of West
178 African family and tribal traditions. Among West African
• 855 tribes, it is a general rule that elders are charged with
the responsibility of maintaining and teaching the tribe
and family linkage and histories. In this role, elders
act as judges of whether younger parents are rearing chil-
dren in the traditional mold. Sea Island elders are charged
with similar responsibilities. In earlier times, the island
elders were responsible for making and interpreting the
Black law. Disputes between neighbors or families were
settled by indigenous elder councils. Only disputes which
drew the attention of the White world were brought to the
White man's court. The isolation of the Sea Islands often
made the elder councils of each island the primary legal
body. Likewise, the few numbers of Whites inhabiting the
islands supported the functioning of the elder councils.

623 Although their functions have been limited, the elder
888 Sea Island councils have been retained to date. The extent
178 to which the high status accorded elders in the Sea Island
121 household has changed, as a consequence of assimilation can
[777] only be postulated. Similarly, the literature offers few
clear statements on commonality of roles and of attitudes
toward elders found among Sea Island and West African
121 parents. Finally, there are few statements comparing Sea
855 Island and West African child rearing practices.

6: Smith

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Consequently, as more Black parents seek knowledge of their West African heritage and strive to rear their children in an African framework, the potential contribution of Sea Island child rearing research is evident.

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The Sea Islander is known in contemporary Black folklore as funny talking and quick to fight. The other view is that the Sea Islander is extremely religious and quick to pray. Perhaps the single most recurring report is of the cultural cohesion of Sea Island communities. It is this cohesiveness which makes Sea Islanders a unique source for research on discipline behavior.

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Certainly the relative isolation of Sea Island communities adds to the possibility that its inhabitants would have similar life histories, beliefs and attitudes. These factors have been shown to act as correlates of discipline behavior. The cohesiveness of the Sea Island communities suggest that the Islanders may have similar predispositions toward discipline. Consequently, the Gullah people are a unique source of data of the effects of antecedent conditions on discipline behavior.

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In the continued absence of systematic data on Sea Island family systems, it may be difficult for significant numbers of Black parents to develop clear conceptions of child rearing within a West African heritage. Hence, before undue emphasis is placed on direct comparisons of West

7: Jackson L-5 (1973-1976) 1989

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ment for a creole language to survive.

Today, the language situation on the islands is complex. The communities are changing under the influx of commercialization, inter-island communication and improved educational facilities. No longer socially isolated, many inhabitants are becoming bilingual. They command both productive and receptive ability in English beyond that of speakers in earlier times. The nuclear family structure

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of the islands is such that the grandparents or some elder member is usually the established household spokesman, and assumes responsibility for rearing the children. As expected, there is evidence of creolization in the language of the younger generations. While many do not purport to actually speak the 'old time talk', they can and do use it in situations requiring them to be spontaneous (i.e. verbal attacks).

1.0. Focus of this study

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The sociolinguistic pressures now exerted on the Sea Island communities match the general conditions that DeCamp (1971:351) has described for post-creole speech communities (i.e. communities in which a creole is in the process of merging with the standard language). There is a correspondence between the dominant official language and the creole, and there is sufficient breakdown in the formerly

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

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St. Helena Island

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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS

562 wrote, "but domestic freedom—the right just found, to
593 have their own way in their families and rule their wives—
that is an inestimable privilege! In slavery the woman
567 was far more important, and was in every way held higher
662 than the man. Several speakers have been here who have
advised the people to set the women in their proper place
—never to tell them anything of their concerns, etc., etc.,
and the notion of being bigger than women generally, is
just now inflating the conceit of the males to an amazing
degree. When women get the vote, too, no people will be
more indignant than these, I suppose."²⁷

567 The care of the children was divided between the
• 855 mother and the plantation nurse, with the other children
also doing their share of "minding child." When Captain
Basil Hall visited a plantation near Charleston on his tour
of the South in 1828 he found the mothers in the field at
their work and "a sober old matron in charge of the three
dozen shining urchins, collected together in a house near
the center of the village. Over the fire hung a large pot
(262) of hominy, a preparation of Indian corn, making ready for
the little folks' supper, and a very merry, happy-looking
party they seemed."²⁸ At all other times, the children
were in the mother's care. It was not an uncommon sight
(854) to see a woman going about her home work with an infant
tied securely to her back.

567 Parents were severe in the discipline of their children,
593 for they did not want their offspring to grow up to be "no-
861 manners." They taught them to curtesy when ap-
867 proached by a white person and to hold out their hands to

²⁷ *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne*, p. 134.

²⁸ Hall, *Travels in North America*, II, 310; *supra*, pp. 97-98.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

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St. Helena Island

THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

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shake; to keep silent in the presence of elders and otherwise to show respect for age. Some of the missionaries who arrived on St. Helena Island shortly after the opening of the Civil War were indignant at the harsh treatment the children received at the hands of their parents. "I don't suppose these children ever received a caress or a word of tenderness since they were infants," wrote Arthur Sumner. "The children are invariably spoken to in harsh and peremptory tones by all grown niggers, and are whipped unmercifully on the least offence. Yet they are very obedient to their parents, and certainly stand much more in awe of adult darkies than they do of us mild-eyed missionaries."²⁹ Miss Towne concluded that parents were not really harsh to their children, but that their rough way of ordering them about, threatening to "skin um 'live" and to "bro'k um back," merely sounded savage. All visitors to the Sea Islands, either as guests of the master before the War or as missionaries, agreed that the children, despite the rough treatment from their parents and despite the fact that they seemed to have no games,³⁰ were a happy, carefree lot. Sir Charles Lyell thought the Hopeton plantation children had "such bright, happy faces when three or four years old, and from that age to ten or twelve . . . such frank and confiding manners, as to be very engaging."³¹ Yet all were horrified by the fact that their mothers permitted them to run about in summer completely nude, a practice which people of today, with their recent adoption of the sunbath theory, would be inclined to approve.

²⁹ Arthur Sumner Papers, St. Helena Island, July 9, 1863.

³⁰ *Letters from Port Royal*, p. 192n.

³¹ Lyell, *Second Visit to the United States*, I, 263.

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